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**‘I’m sorry, you said she was how old?’ Youthfulness and the fashion model**

**Angie Draper**

**"Welcome to the kingdom of modelling" (Morris 1997: 6)**

As a young girl, the world of fashion modelling perplexed me. Tall, slender and appallingly beautiful, sylph-like women strutted up and down the catwalks and stared back at me from the covers of magazines. I admired them from afar, always aware of the implausibility of my ever being up there strutting alongside them, as I was too young. These fashion models were women, not girls. However, it never ceased to amaze me just how much these women looked like girls, so young and fresh, despite their obvious womanly attributes. How were they women yet, simultaneously, so overwhelmingly youthful looking? What was it that distinguished them from other women their age who actually looked their age as opposed to someone as young as myself? These questions will now be addressed in relation to the manner in which the physical body can be manipulated by an individual so as to alter their appearance. In particular, the body of the fashion model will be the focus in the following discussion. I will be exploring the way in which the fashion model manipulates her own body so as to embody an image of natural youthfulness which is prized, in Western society, as a valuable commodity.

**"You don't have to be born with a beautiful smile to have one!" (*Harper's Bazaar Australia*, December 1998: 223)**

In modern society, the human body is characteristically plastic. Physicality no longer constrains those who live within, as the body can be fashioned by the individual as

desired. The individual can do so using a number of different body sculpting techniques. One can merely cut out those sweets and cakes and be sure to eat lightly at dinner time. One can join the local gymnasium or weight loss centre to 'lose those unwanted kilos today'. One technique becoming increasingly popular is if one has a well-endowed bank account, cosmetic surgery. Its rising popularity becomes starkly apparent when flicking through recent *Harper's Bazaar Australia* or *Vogue Australia* magazines. A *Harper's Bazaar* promotion asserts that if you are "dissatisfied with your body" you can "reshape your future" (March 1999: 223) with a local cosmetic surgery clinic. *Vogue Australia* devotes the back cover of their magazine to a company called "Beauty by Design" (January 1999: 133), dedicating themselves to helping individuals who are considering "enhancing themselves". It is advertisements such as these which are becoming more and more numerous in such magazines, indicating the increase in the realisation of many individuals that their bodies can be fashioned according to their own, individual standards. It exemplifies the rise of bodily malleability. Implicit in this situation is the individual desire or motivation to change the appearance of one's body. As Finkelstein (1994: 301) states "[a]pppearance matters". The motivation to alter one's appearance, then, takes many forms. Anything from the desire just to feel better about one's body to the desire to embody the physical attributes of one's first barbie doll. The most common reason for the alteration of the physical body by an individual is, however, "bodily preservation" (Featherstone 1991: 170).

**"Take action against ageing" (*Harper's Bazaar Australia*, March 1999: 260)**

Modern society privileges that which is young. Everywhere we look we are confronted with images of the individual which represent a typically youthful appearance: smooth skin free of wrinkles and blemishes; shiny, glossy hair; skin slightly tanned with that healthy glow; white, clear eyes. "You can't pick up a glossy magazine without coming face to face with perfection. Free from the usual baggage of sags, creases, bulges or (the dreaded) cellulite" (Morris 1997: 104). Furthermore, they appear as though they have never once encountered the scalpel blade of a cosmetic surgeon. They appear to be naturally young, regardless of their actual age. We are all aware of the types of individuals that fit the youthful image. They are frequently encountered in such places as the local newsagent that houses the latest editions of fashion magazines advertising a brilliant new anti-wrinkle cream that "radically helps reduce the signs of ageing caused by the drying effects of UVA rays and free radicals" (*Harper's Bazaar*, March 1999: 13). In such situations only rarely do we encounter an individual over the age of thirty years and, when we do, they are made up in such a way as to eradicate most, if not all, apparent physical effects of ageing. We continue to experience this situation in society, despite the fact that every individual is well aware of their inevitable ageing and eventual death. Individuals are overwhelmingly encouraged to "combat [physical] deterioration and decay" (Featherstone 1991: 170) and to "recapture youthful freshness" (Finkelstein 1994: 22). The extent to which this aspect is emphasised is exemplified, once again, by the media. We are consistently bombarded with images of fresh, youthful-looking individuals enjoying themselves immensely whilst participating in highly active, youth-oriented activities. Appearance altering techniques such as cosmetic surgery, anti-wrinkle creams, and other bodily preservation techniques such as "longevity centres...one step health and

healing sires" (*Vogue Australia*, February 1999: 50) proliferate advertising space on television, in magazines and newspapers, even on billboards, claiming new and improved ways in which to maintain the youthful appearance of the physical body (Shilling 1993). For example, the issue of *Harper's Bazaar Australia* mentioned above finds it necessary to provide their readers with an "alist" of cosmetic surgeons in each different state of Australia and to also list the 'Top Five Users of Collagen' in Australia. The images of youthfulness that we encounter in the media are embodied by one particular type of individual. These individuals are known more commonly as fashion models.

The fashion model epitomises natural youthfulness. Regardless of her "real" age, the fashion model frequently appears as though she has just stepped out of the classroom. The irony of this situation, though, is many of the models we encounter on the covers of magazines or on the television are not so young. Indeed, some of them could be considered elderly. Carmen Dell'Orefice, the top fashion model to whom the above quote of "ageless beauty" refers, frankly states that "[i]n two years I'm going to be seventy" (*Vogue Australia*, February 1999: 30). Yet, in actually seeing the photograph of this particular fashion model used in the magazine, her appearance reflects as much 'youthful freshness' as does the photograph beside her of her photo on the cover of *Vogue* magazine in October, 1947. How is it, then, that this woman has maintained such apparent eternal youth? In a documentary prepared for television by fashion photographer David Bailey, the same model. Carmen Dell'Orefice, states the following:

"You're looking at a face full of silicone, which is now outlawed in this country temporarily, and since silicone isn't available I'm beginning to get again the little fine lines on my upper lip, certain plains of my face, ah,

certain lines that I can't build out. Only silicone does that for me. Collagen doesn't do it because collagen is absorbed by the body, it's animal matter" (*Models Close Up*, 1998).

Clearly, Dell'Orefice has discovered the extent to which the plasticity of the body allows an individual to maintain their 'youthfully fresh' appearance through the alteration of the physical body. This case, however, is considerably extreme in light of the manner in which the fashion model sustains her youthfulness through the manipulation of her physical body. The majority of fashion models use more subtle methods in the active preservation of their youthful appearance.

**"New-age beauty demands regular body care - from your head to your fingertips right down to your toes" (Morris 1997: 134)**

Youthfulness, for the majority of fashion models, is maintained through regular bodily maintenance practices. These practices enable the fashion model to control and, on rare occasions, actually improve her physical appearance. They are designed specifically to counter the effects of ageing on the physical body and to enhance any of the ageing effects that may have already appeared. The various practices undertaken by the fashion model are done so repetitively and routinely on a daily, weekly and 'when they need doing' basis (Draper 1998). Typically, however, the practices which aim specifically at the inhibition of the physical effects of ageing are practised both daily and weekly. Daily practice for the fashion model is imperative. Each day begins with a habitually practised bodily routine. This routine enables the fashion model not only to maintain the state of her physical body in peak condition, but in addition to curb the physical ageing process and sustain her 'youthful freshness'. Such a routine usually involves meticulous care and

attention to the different parts of her body. Attention is aimed at every particular part of the fashion models' body, being sure not to overlook any area. Combatting with the ageing process, the fashion model focuses her attention mainly to the care of her skin. The skin is centrally the area of the body which is most apparently affected by ageing processes. Wrinkles appear, along with spider veins, stretch marks and blemishes. Skin becomes slack and loose, no longer youthfully elastic and firm. These processes are inevitable for all individuals, as is ageing in general. However, regardless of this fact, the fashion model continually works with the skin or surface of her body in order to minimise these processes as much as possible. It is economically advantageous for her to do so. As the care of the skin is imperative for the fashion model, Sandra Morris (1997), in *The Model Manual*, identifies the care of the skin on the face as in need of special attention, as the face is central to the maintenance of a fashion models' youthful looking appearance. In so doing, Morris accentuates the importance of the routine practise of practices such as cleansing, exfoliating, and moisturising the surface of the face, stating that these are the practices essential for the maintenance of "youthful skin" (Morris 1997: 133). The routine practise of cleansing and exfoliating the surface of the face is imperative in achieving "a fresher-looking complexion that is easier for moisturizers to penetrate" (Morris 1997: 131). Cleansing the face inhibits the appearance of pimples and blemishes and must be practised each day both morning and night. Exfoliation removes dead skin cells to reveal a younger, fresher layer of skin underneath. The exfoliation of the facial area should only be undertaken "once or twice a week at most, or you'll risk stripping away live cells as well as dead one" (1997:131), as opposed to the remainder of the bodily surface which can be exfoliated every second day. Moisturising is thought to

be the basis of youthful-looking skin on the face. "A good moisturizer should maintain, preserve and enhance the skin" (1997:131). Numerous external factors such as sunlight, stress, illness and air pollution "can upset the skin's delicate balance and can cause premature ageing" (1997:133). A 'good moisturiser' should have a UV sunscreen to combat the appearance of fine lines caused by the drying of the skin by the sun. Anti-ageing ingredients are also a must in a 'good moisturiser', as these ingredients aid in "skin renewal" and "can help reduce fine lines when used regularly" (1997:133). Morris continues, prescribing a number of different strategies essential in sustaining a youthful facial appearance. Avoid "exposure to the sun, drug-taking and nicotine" as these habits cause the skin to age prematurely and "exacerbates [the effects] of free radicals"; eat only "a healthy, balanced diet"; "[m]assage your face"; have [r]egular facials"; always [b]e gentle with your skin"; take dietary supplements "to improve skin's texture"; exercise the muscles of the face to avoid skin slackening; exercise regularly as fresh air combats free radicals; "AHA's can help speed up skin renewal"; Retinova gel reduces fine lines; anti-wrinkle "miracle pads" pump the skin with vitamins making "wrinkles less noticeable", and, finally, sleep on your back to prevent sleep lines (1997:133). These strategies all benefit in the prevention of the ageing process and the sustenance of a youthful face, provided they are practised habitually. Morris stresses that these strategies would fail to be of any use if only practised once a month. Thus, they must be practised as a "routine" (1997:130), especially by fashion models. As fashion model Jennifer shows:

**“Jennifer** - Um, I like to put a mask on or something ... then I hafta put on my make-up and make sure I look like a model before I step out. Always have to look good on the street.

**Angie** - Mm hm



**J** - Like even if I'm not modelling, 'cos people recognise you=

A - Ye(hh)ah

J - And if you're looking terrible their like, "Yeah right".

A - Ye(hh)ah

J - They just won't book you again" (Draper 1998: 30).

A fashion model must maintain the surface of her body in peak condition, as her body sustains her living. Her appearance is a commodity which she is able to sell on the market. If this appearance is unappealing to those who hire fashion models, she will not be booked by clients. As youthfulness is prized in Western culture (Featherstone 1991), it is economically advantageous for the fashion model to maintain her 'youthful freshness' at all costs. The care of the skin does not merely involve the care of the facial area, however. In addition, overall bodily skin care is essential to the maintenance of fashion model 'youthful freshness'. Once again, cleansing and exfoliation are imperative, as is moisturising. However, in dealing with the skin on the body in general, a fashion model must specifically be mindful of the following at all times: the firmness of the bust and neck; the eradication of cellulite; the prevention of stretchmarks, thread veins and skin discoloration or pigmentation; and the hindrance of the ageing effects of the sun (Morris 1997). These physical signs of ageing must be controlled as they hinder the fashion models' chance of receiving work. The control of these signs involves the consistent use of moisturiser to prevent stretchmarks, the use of concealer and fake tan to disguise any skin pigmentation's or thread veins, and regular exercise to maintain the firmness of the skin around the bust and neck areas, as well as the bodily surface in general.

**"Natural Beauty"? (Morris 1997: 141)**

Ironically enough, this is the title of the section following instruction on the care of the face of the body in Morris' manual. The irony is that youth, which is continuously equated with beauty in Western society, appears to be anything but natural for the fashion model, despite the fact that the fashion model appears to be completely natural when encountered by an onlooker on the cover of a magazine or on television. Indeed, fashion model youth is, rather, sustained through the utilisation of the above practices. Without the use of such practices, the fashion model would succumb to the ageing processes more rapidly, hence shortening her career as a fashion model. Furthermore, youthful beauty does not maintain itself. It is worked on meticulously by the fashion model, being sure as not to overlook any part of the bodily surface that could betray her youthful confidence to the onlooker. The fashion model works on her body in order to maintain the firmness and flawlessness characteristic of a youthfully appealing physical body. Her bodily plasticity is maximised to its full potential. The fashion model, through the use of consistent bodily practices maintains a particular type of body needed to excel in the modelling industry. Thus, the concept of youthful beauty being natural for the fashion model, is highly problematic considering the extent to which it is actively and routinely practised and maintained by the fashion model herself.

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